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SUBJECT: Sudan - Humanitarian Challenges in the East

Summary

¶1. A USAID team visited Kassala from April 20 to 23, 2006, to assess the humanitarian situation in eastern Sudan. A disagreement between the U.N. Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) and Sudan's Government of National Unity (GNU) concerning implementation of the U.N. Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) is preventing U.N. agencies from conducting humanitarian operations in Kassala State. The withdrawal of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) from the Hamesh Koreib enclave continues, but tension has escalated due to uncertainty surrounding final security handover procedures. Residents originally displaced from Hamesh Koreib have expressed their unwillingness to return following the withdrawal of SPLA forces. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) are likely motivated by a desire to maintain access to water, health, and education services currently provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in their current IDP communities. End Summary.

Background

¶2. From April 20 to 23, 2006, USAID Senior Humanitarian Advisor Kate Farnsworth and Food Security Advisor Abdel Rahman Hamid visited Kassala State to monitor USAID-funded activities and gain a better understanding of the current humanitarian situation in eastern Sudan. The team held group meetings with local and international NGOs operating in the area including Accord, the Sudanese Red Crescent (SRC), Ockenden, the Dutch Red Cross, and GOAL. In addition, the team convened specific meetings with GOAL, SRC, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), UNMIS Civil Affairs, U.N. Military Observers (UNMO), and local political actors including the Governor of Kassala State, representatives from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and Ahmed Tirik, leader of the Hadendawa tribe and a former Kassala State Minister of Education.

¶3. Sudan's GNU remains suspicious of humanitarian agencies operating in the east and monitors their work closely. The USAID visit occurred in tandem with a

similar field visit of the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO). The local Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) office detailed two staff members to travel full time with the USAID and ECHO assessment teams. HAC officials either participated in or monitored all conversations that occurred in the field between the USAID and ECHO teams and beneficiary populations. (Note: This also happens in other sensitive areas within Sudan, such as Abyei. End note.) Local officials prevented the USAID team from traveling to Odi, an International Rescue Committee (IRC) project area approximately 10 kilometers from the entry point of the Hamesh Koreib enclave. Authorities have also blocked IRC's access to Odi in recent weeks, and only SRC enjoys freedom of movement throughout the area.

Status of Forces Disagreement Threatens U.N. Presence in
the East

14. An ongoing disagreement between UNMIS leadership and government officials over interpretation of articles 64 and 65 of the U.N. SOFA has brought all U.N. humanitarian operations outside of Kassala town to a halt. The GNU insists that the SOFA only applies to UNMIS political and military personnel. U.N. specialized agencies - such as the U.N. World Food Program (WFP), U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), U.N. World Health Organization (WHO), U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and U.N. High Commission for Refugees - continue to assert their right to travel freely throughout Sudan without obtaining a government-issued travel permit. The resulting stand-off has suspended U.N. staff movements out of the immediate vicinity of Kassala town. Unable to monitor their relief

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and assistance programs, WFP and UNICEF have suspended food and non-food distributions in the local area. In a meeting with USAID, the Kassala State Governor asserted the government's position: that it reserves the right to monitor and control visitor movements within its sovereign territory. Furthermore, the GNU sees no reason to drop this requirement as the U.N. has complied with such requests for the last 18 years. The Governor acknowledged the importance of U.N. contributions to the development of the area and proposed the mutual adoption of a travel notification system to which both parties could agree. The U.N. has not yet accepted this proposal and has threatened to withdraw all operational agencies from eastern Sudan if the SOFA issue is not resolved in a timely manner.

15. Meanwhile, non-government organizations (NGOs) continue to request travel permits to move out of the city. In general, permits can be obtained in about 24 hours. In some cases, permits are granted for multiple days to facilitate longer field trips. The USAID team observed that travel documents are carefully scrutinized by security officers at each checkpoint. When the USAID team attempted to visit an FAO project on the periphery of Kassala town, the group was denied access because the specific site was not listed on the travel permit.

SPLA Withdrawal from Hamish Koreib Creates Uncertainty
and Tension

16. Uncertainty surrounding the withdrawal of SPLA forces from the Hamesh Koreib enclave is a major topic of conversation and an ongoing source of tension in eastern Sudan. While attempting to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing the local humanitarian community, the USAID team discovered that even foreign aid workers are affected by the prevailing tension.

There is general concern within the humanitarian community that completion of the SPLA withdrawal (currently scheduled for June) will create a local power vacuum that will likely result in violent clashes between Eastern Front and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) for control of the area. One U.N. interlocutor opined that SAF may initiate reprisals against local civilians accused of aiding the Eastern Front during the conflict, and that reprisals of this nature could trigger displacements into Eritrea. Local residents generally acknowledged the presence of Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebels. Prior to the team's visit, JEM had claimed responsibility for a security incident at Wager. Since the USAID team visited the area, JEM rebels ambushed vehicles traveling on the Port Sudan road while ostensibly targeting the Kassala State Governor's convoy.

¶7. The Kassala State Governor promised IRC, USAID's largest partner in the area, access to Hamish Koreib following completion of the SPLA withdrawal. SRC is the only NGO currently permitted to operate in Hamesh Koreib town. SRC is providing limited health services to local beneficiaries using a hospital and compound previously occupied by Samaritan's Purse but does not have the financial resources to continue operating indefinitely. SRC expressed interest in a joint partnership with Samaritan's Purse but Samaritan's Purse has been unable to obtain a permit to travel to Kassala. USAID partners who normally work in Hamish Koreib anticipate shortages of food and medicine should relief programs stall during this transition period. The government has expressed a desire to put an end to relief programs in the area and cannot guarantee the safety of any NGO that would "cross the front line" from government-held Hamesh Koreib to "SPLA-controlled" areas.

USAID Programs - IDPs Are Happy Where They Are

¶8. Kassala's 10 IDP camps hold an estimated 78,000 residents who benefit from integrated programs aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty and marginalization

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in the east. These interventions are funded primarily by USAID and ECHO. USAID grants to IRC, GOAL, FAO, and WFP support villages in various localities - including the government-held areas of Hamesh Koreib - with health, water, food security, and livelihoods activities such as restocking, women savings societies, and pasture-land recovery. These interventions are yielding a positive impact in the areas served and provide lessons learned for expansion of similar activities if additional resources become available. A longer trip report, submitted separately by e-mail, provides details on projects and site visits undertaken by the team.

¶9. IDPs interviewed by the USAID team said they had no intention of returning home to Hamesh Koreib, even following the SPLA withdrawal. Since all land in Hadendawa areas is tribal, IDPs were assured that they would be able to establish permanent settlements. With access to good schools, clinics, and safe drinking water, they see no reason why they should return to the "enclave". Local residents expressed some concern that IDPs may be manipulated by tribal leaders who want them to repopulate areas of the Hamesh Koreib enclave and reduce the demand for land along the Gash River. However, the government believes the IDPs will stay where they are. The government appears to have begun preparing for this eventuality by investing in social service infrastructure, such as schools, that will serve groups of IDP villages.

¶10. A major conference on humanitarian and development

assistance to the east sponsored by the U.N., NGOs, and the eastern state governments took place in Port Sudan on May 2 and 3. Septel will report on the key agenda items and points of discussion during that meeting.

STEINFELD